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ABSTRACT

This paper asserts that helping students to clarify and commit to realizable learning goals increases learner motivation and retention. It is recommended that any adult English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) teacher should do some sort of "goals work" with their students and that program-wide strategies to address learner motivation and retention be devised. Goals work conducted by one teacher showed markedly increased retention and completion rate of his students. Two attachments are included: a "Goals For Life And For This Class" questionnaire for students and a worksheet that helps students identify what inhibits and motivates their learning of English. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse For ESL Literacy Education) (KFT)

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ED 445 562

The Importance of Helping Adult ESL Students Set Goals

By Tom Bello

From my experience, teacher research, like all true learning, starts with an insight or question and develops with a process or journey toward discovery. My journey toward helping adult ESL students set goals began back in September, 1998, when I was honored to represent the state of Virginia at the National Forum on Adult Education and Literacy: Views from Teachers sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education. At the Forum, something like this question was posed, "If money were not a factor, what would be the one thing your adult education program could do that would best promote learner retention?" Well, here we were in Washington and money was no longer a factor, so we 50 teachers suggested big budget ideas like free day-care for all of our students' children while their parents were attending our classes, or free transportation for our adult students like their school children receive, or onsite job counselors working full-time to prepare and place all of our students in meaningful and financially satisfactory employment.

All well and good until Andrea Parrella, a Research Assistant at the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL), stood up and shared with us some research NCSALL was doing on learner motivation and retention. She told us to imagine our learners enveloped in a force field where positive and negative forces either helped or hindered their educational pursuits. According to 150 in-depth interviews with adult learners at 15 different sites in five New England states, she then identified the number one positive force that kept learners returning to class. The research highlighted none of the expensive items we had recommended; rather, that primary incentive to learner retention was the individual learner's being able to set a goal and realize some progress toward accomplishing that goal.

This research has subsequently been published and is available online at www.gse.harvard.edu/~ncsall/research/report12.pdf; or by contacting NCSALL at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Cambridge, MA 02138-3572, phone 617-495-1712, but at the time most of us realized immediately that any adult education program concerned about learner retention, persistence and motivation needed to develop ways to help learners clarify and commit to learning goals. Here we are in a world where money is always a consideration, and the

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research had given us an incentive to keep our students that didn't cost a dime. I also recognized that I should try to develop goals strategies that would work in my classroom since in the state of Virginia, adult education practitioners are mandated to have a Professional Development Plan (PDP) that involves teacher research in an area of individual or general concern. The National Forum had given me my PDP: What strategies work best to help adult learners identify, clarify and commit to realizable learning goals?

I started by reading whatever I could find. NCSALL's own publication, the popular FOCUS ON BASICS (also available online and at the address above) had a special issue on learner motivation (March 1998) with a good bibliography. I talked to teachers. I started my own work. I took the notion of force fields and drew a stick-figured student climbing some steps. Arrows came toward the student both from the front and from behind. Above the arrows coming toward the student I wrote: What holds you back? What inhibits your learning? Above the arrows coming from behind the student I wrote: What motivates, what helps you learn? Below the arrows I put a space for Short-term goals and another space for Long-term goals. I labeled the whole handout "Steps in Learning English." (See attachment one.) Then I gave the handout to my advanced students at Willston Multicultural Center in Falls Church, VA, as homework and explained that I wanted them to consider what motivated and what hindered their educational progress. Also I wanted them to think about where they were going in their learning: What were their short and long term goals?

The following class I divided the class of 22 into half, then divided each half into four groups of two or three students in each group. One half of the class handled the "gravitational factors" that impeded or inhibited learning; the other half handled the "motivational factors" that propelled or helped learning. Students talked and chose their best answers and wrote them on the board, each group listing one factor that had to be different from another group's choice. Thus we had on the board four different positive and four different negative forces that affected our students. All of the discussion and the choices were theirs. With me, the whole class discussed their findings, then I shared the results from the NCSALL research, stressing the importance of going step by step setting and trying to realize specific learning goals.

As our next step, I gave them a follow-up homework, labeled "Goals for Life and for this Class." (See attachment two.) On this sheet, I asked a series of questions about their goals. First,

"What are five goals for your life?" Second, "How will you make your goals come true?" Third, "If one goal is to improve your English, how will you do it?" Fourth, "What is/are your goal(s) for this class?" To help them clarify and choose, I gave them eleven possible learning and participation questions about the class: 1. Will you improve your English? 2. Will you be friends with the other students? 3. Will you be friends with the teacher? 4. Will you come to every class? 5. Will you do your homework after every class? 6. Will you pay attention in class? 7. Will you try to use your language in class or use English? 8. Will you try to think more in English? 9. Will you try to enjoy using English? 10. Will you try to practice English outside of class? Where? When? With whom? 11. Will you tell yourself: "I can do this! I can learn English well!"? I gave them this handout to take home, think about and then answer as realistically as possible.

The next class, I divided the students into pairs. Each pair asked each other the first and second questions at the top of the page, concerning goals and means. Each pair was then to chose one of their goals and the means to accomplish it and write it on the board. We soon had eleven or so goals and how these goals would be achieved written by the students themselves, and we discussed them. After this discussion and the previous class discussion, students told me they had a good idea of realizable goals. I then did a polling activity where each pair took one of the eleven learning and participation questions and asked that question to every student in the class. Students could answer: "yes," "so-so," "no." The students tabulated the three possible answers from all the students in the class and posted the numerical results on the board. At the beginning of the class, each of these questions was asked in the future tense; about eight weeks into the twelve-week class, the same questions were asked again in the same way, but using the present perfect; for example, 1. Have you improved your English? The last week of class, the same questions were asked one last time again the same way as a polling activity, all asking all, but this time using the simple past; for example, 1. Did you improve your English?

As might be expected, at the beginning of the class almost all of the student gave overwhelmingly positive responses to all the questions. Yet by setting these goals before their eyes and by returning to them throughout the course of instruction, students were able to keep these goals in mind and to plan accordingly. The last week of class, 13 out of 22 could answer "Did you come to every class?" in the affirmative, but to the first question, "Did you improve your English?" 21 of 22 said "yes"; 1 said "so-so"; 0 said "no." Now each of these questions was asked student to student, and I never tried to monitor responses. Answers were posted numerically, and no names were used.

Students should have felt neither intimidated nor that they needed to flatter me in their responses. In any case, 22 of the 23 original students finished this class, a retention rate of 96%. This was an evening class. I also taught a morning class at the same site, the same level, but I did not do this goals work with them. Of the 24 original students, 20 finished, a retention rate of 83%. I repeated my goals work in a following session, only this time working with the morning class. 26 of 28 students (93% retention) finished the class; as compared to 27 out of 32 (84% retention) for the same level, same site, same session, but in the evening and without the goals work.

I am no statistician nor do I know all the factors that cause students to continue or stop coming to class. In addition, my work with goals is not finished. I want to concentrate further on more specific learning goals concerning content and areas of study. Nevertheless, I do believe from my own limited research and discovery that helping students clarify and commit to realizable learning goals does increase learner motivation and retention. I would suggest that any adult ESL teacher should think about doing some form of goals work with their students at a level appropriate to their students, and any adult ESL program at any level should devise program-wide strategies to address learner motivation and retention. If being able to set and see some progress in realizing learning goals is the number one positive force to keep your adult students moving forward in their educational journey, what are you doing now to help them set and meet their goals?

Tom Bello

(See attachments one and two.)

GOALS FOR LIFE AND FOR THIS CLASS

1. What are 5 goals for your life?
   a.
   b.
   c.
   d.
   e.

2. How will you make your goals come true?

3. If one goal is to improve your English, how will you do it?

4. What is/are your goal(s) for this class?

For example:

a. Will you improve your English?

b. Will you be friends with the other students?

c. Will you be friends with the teacher?

d. Will you come to every class?

e. Will you do your homework after every class?

f. Will you pay attention in class?

g. Will you try to use your language in class or use English?

h. Will you try to think more in English?

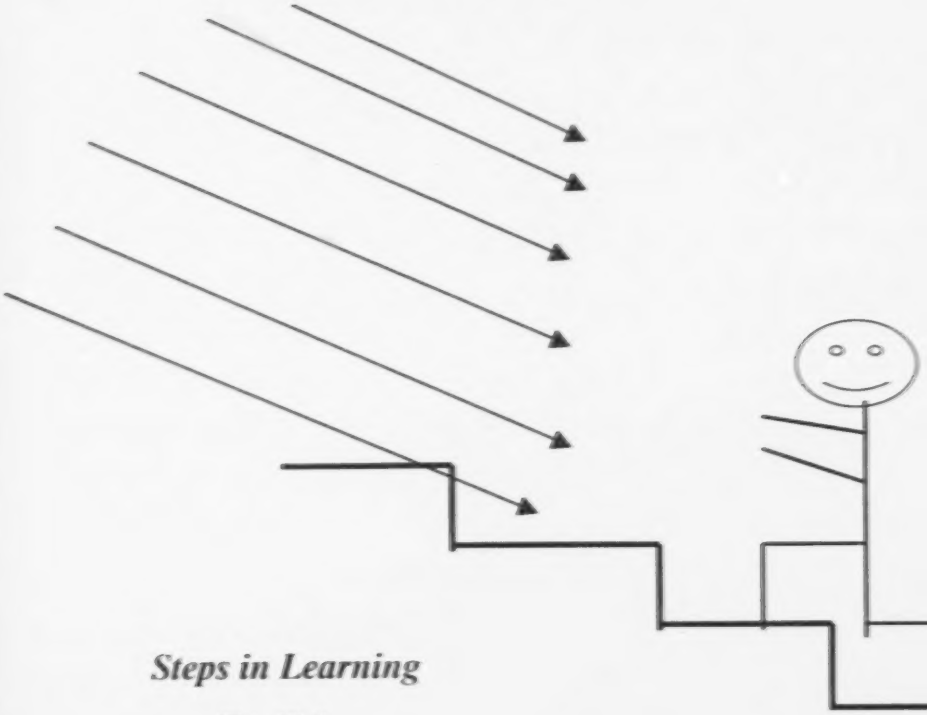
i. Will you try to enjoy using English?

j. Will you try to practice English outside of class?
   Where?
   When?
   With whom?

k. Will you tell yourself: "I can do this! I can learn English well!"?

What holds you back?

What inhibits your learning?



Steps in Learning English

Short-term

Goals

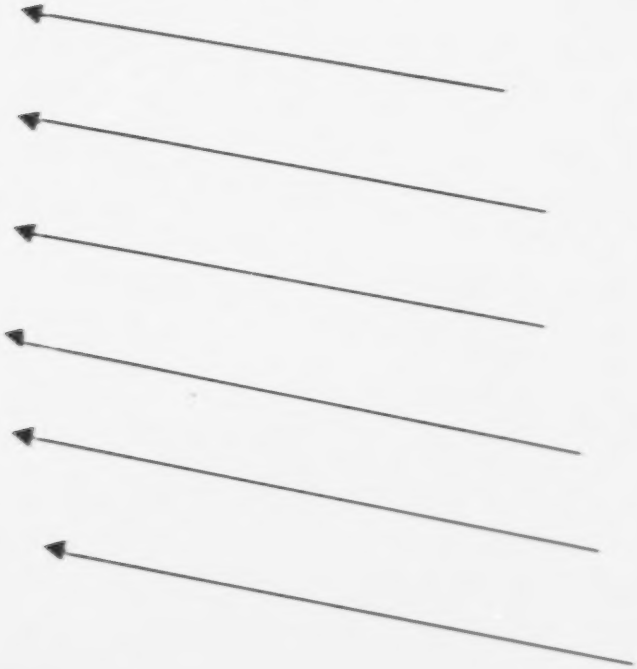
_____

_____

_____

What motivates,

what helps you learn?



Long-term

Goals